

# Michael Ondaatje woos with words

by Lisa A Trofymow

We packed Humanities L-3 last Monday (Jan. 21) at noon to hear "one of Canada's best-selling and best-known poets" — we filled every chair, every space on the floor and the stairs. Latecomers stood in the door ways to hear excerpts from *Running in the Family* and *Secular Love*. The poet was Michael Ondaatje, in the flesh — and I was going to talk to him.

Since he chose to read from his two latest works, I suppose he wanted his audience to hear him, as a poet, at his most mature. The opening of *Secular Love* quotes Peter Handke in an exchange between an actor and a narrator:

*'I've seen you in films. You always seem embarrassed at the thought of what you have to say next...Your trouble, I believe, is that you always hold back something of yourself...You haven't been discovered yet. I'm looking forward to seeing you grow older from film to film.'*

Considering that *Running in the Family* is Ondaatje's eighth book, I assume that Monday's audience was expecting excellent poetry. Ondaatje himself described the book as a prose/poetry collection based on his parents' and grandparents' years spent in Sri Lanka. Like an earlier work, *The Man with Seven Toes*, *Running in the Family* is based on real personalities.

Ondaatje gives these personalities their supposed backgrounds in (what I term) his "prose/poetry fiction," as in "Snakes in the House" where 'the voice' (as Ondaatje describes his poet-narrator) tells of the family household besieged by snakes from the surrounding forest. It seems everyone in the family is continually shooting the varmints to pieces: it's a battle between the civilization of the household and the evil (snakes) of the wilderness. However, one snake is spared because of its seeming benevolence — it is said to be the father's spirit, protecting the

narrator's family.

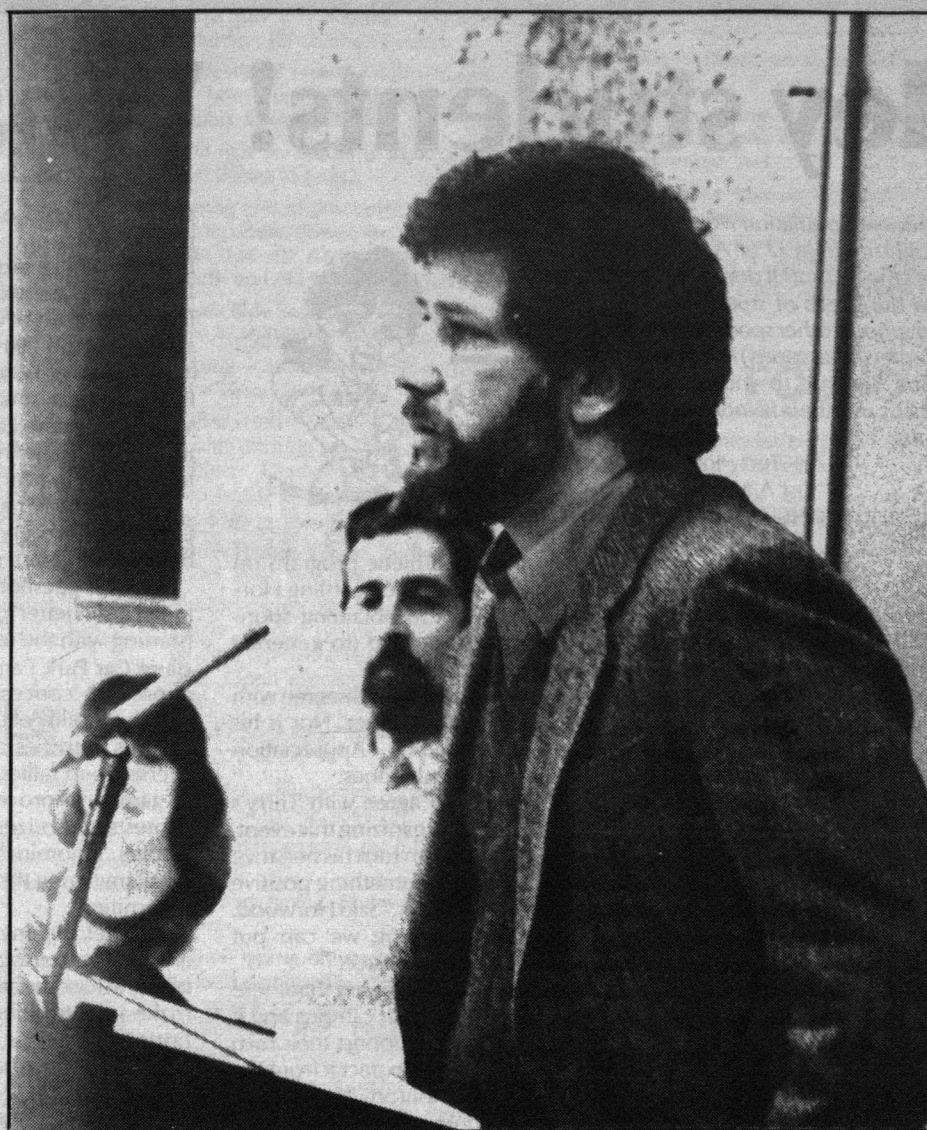
So Ondaatje gave us, his audience, a metaphorical bit of history with the reading from *Running in the Family*. Perhaps finding us to be a receptive bunch (even laughing in appropriate places as he read), he now was prepared to read from *Secular Love*. The book is divided into four sections, each one depicting a different point of view ranging from external to internal and back to external. The third section, "Rock bottom," from which he read first, is "closer to the voice, love poems, in a way," he told us. Poems closer to the heart of the poet himself? (I'll — you'll — never know. He doesn't do interviews anymore, having had a couple of "bad ones" already, according to poet Doug Barbour.)

The voice of "Inner Tube" takes a trip down a "warm, July river"... "I'm the prow/ on an ancient vessel..." "I'm going down to Peru/ soul between my teeth." (Water — the river, the ocean — is a recurring image — almost an obsession — throughout *Secular Love*.) The river trip implies escape, dreaming, subconsciousness; a love of introspection essential to most modern poetry.

By now the audience was relaxed, enjoying Ondaatje's crisp diction and low, melodious voice as he read in his distinctively 'straight style': no dramatics, no campiness. The audience was free to interpret what we would from the text without being prompted — in fact, it is to the poet's disadvantage to enforce premeditated meaning into his words through certain kinds of emphasis or gestures. Of course, this style of reading means that the audience must *listen*, rather than passively watch some entertainment.

For someone who supposedly sells much poetry through looks alone, Ondaatje certainly can woo with his words — judging by the silence during such lines as:

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Ondaatje gives audience a metaphorical bit of history from his new book, *Running in the Family*.

## Taking in that Tabackin jazz

by Mike Evans

Lew Tabackin, premiere jazz tenor saxophonist and flautist brings his trio to the Yardbird Suite Wednesday, January 23 through Saturday January 26.

Tabackin is well known in jazz circles for two simultaneous projects: as the soloist fronting this trio and as co-leader of the big band he formed with his wife, pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi.

In a recent interview in *Coda* magazine, Tabackin cited renowned saxophonists Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane and Coleman Hawkins as influences on his own style. Coming to Edmonton from jazz's prime stomping

ground, New York City, Tabackin promises to bring an exciting, professional show to the Yardbird. On this tour, his compatriots will be Jay Anderson on bass and Eddie Marshall on drums.

Tickets are available at the door only, beginning at 7:30 p.m. They are \$7 for members and \$10 for guests.

The Yardbird was recently granted a full liquor license, so more than coffee will be available. The Yardbird Suite is located at 103 Street and 86 Avenue in Old Strathcona. Due to printing schedules, Tabackin's review will be printed after his show closes, Tuesday January 29.

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